

UEH Seminar Topic: Jim Crow in Popular Culture

Title: It's Not Funny: Jim Crow in Popular Culture

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Grade Levels: 11: United States History II

Time Frame: 2-3 84-minute lessons

Links to Massachusetts History and Social Studies Frameworks:

USI. 41 Explain the policies and consequences of Reconstruction
D. the opposition of Southern whites to Reconstruction
G. the rise of Jim Crow laws

USII.9 Analyze the post-Civil War struggles of African Americans and women to gain basic civil rights. (H)

- A. Carrie Chapman Catt
- B. W.E.B. Du Bois
- C. Marcus Garvey
- D. the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- E. Alice Paul
- F. Booker T. Washington

Essential Objectives:

Students will be able to describe the stereotypical depictions of African Americans that began with minstrel shows of the 1830s.

Students will be able to explain how some Bostonians responded to the negative stereotypes of African Americans depicted in W.D. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation."

Essential Questions:

What's wrong with stereotypes?

How have stereotypical depictions of African Americans hindered their opportunities?

Procedure:

This lesson would best be used after lessons on Reconstruction and the development of the Jim Crow south, so that students have an understanding of the legal and social segregation that existed in America beginning in the late 19th century.

1) Begin with a discussion of stereotypes: what is a stereotype? What stereotypes do we live with today? Explain that stereotypical depictions of African Americans, which began in the years before the Civil War, were used to justify first slavery and then segregation. They were pervasive in American Popular culture.

- 2) After describing minstrel shows and explaining that they first became popular in the antebellum era, especially in northern cities, display or distribute photocopies of broadsides and sheet music covers from minstrel shows. Ask students to examine the images and, on separate paper, silently list what they see, noting especially the characteristics of African Americans that are depicted in the images.
 - Broadsides and Ephemera, Boston Public Library:
 - “Ben Cotton’s California Minstrels”
 - “Jim Crow Broadside”
 - Minstrel Documents, Boston Public Library;
 - “Denison’s Minstrels Sheet Music”
 - Duke University Library Digital Collection:
 - “May Irwin’s Bully Song: Widow Jones”

- 3) Engage the class in a discussion of the characteristics that they noted. Use discretion as you discuss these characteristics, taking care to point out that this is what many people saw and some people believed to be true about African Americans: their African features are emphasized, they are sometimes made to look ape-like, with large feet and hairy hands, they are sometimes shown dressing “above their station,” they are made to look simple-minded. Explain that in the shows, where whites made up in black face danced and sang songs, the characters usually spoke in a dialect that also made them seem simple-minded, they were depicted as lazy, as criminals, as alcoholics who were sexually promiscuous, and generally as buffoons. Ask students: if you were a northern white who had little contact with black people, what would you end up thinking about them if your only “knowledge” came from seeing a minstrel show?

- 4) Remind students of the system of segregation that had been established in America by the late 19th century. The use of “Jim Crow” characters and images in shows and advertising served to justify the system that existed. Beginning with the release of the film “Birth of a Nation,” these stereotypes also appeared in popular films.

- 5) Show selected clips from “Birth of a Nation,” asking students to watch for stereotypes:
 - The Stonemans’ housekeeper becoming “excited” (black women as Jezebels)
 - Former slaves voting, and the Reconstruction legislature in session (blacks as Stupid, alcoholics)
 - Gus chasing after Ben’s young sister, who kills herself rather than be defiled (black men as lusting after white women)
 Discuss each clip before moving on to the next.

- 6) Explain to students that when the film was shown in Boston in a theater on Tremont street, not far from where a vibrant black community had existed for decades, there were protests and near riots in the city. Divide students into groups of three or four students and give each group a newspaper article describing these protests:
 - “Mayor Curley Hissed” April 16, 1915
 - “Birth of a Nation Causes Near Riot” April 18, 1915
 - “Colored People Storm State House” April 19, 1915
 - “Colored Women Form a League” April 26, 1915
 - “Say Box Office Discriminated” May 1, 1915
 - “Not Sure it is Best to Stop It—colored Preachers Protest at a Meeting on Common” May 3, 1915
 - “Arrest Eight of Objectors” June 8, 1915
 - “Demonstration by 20 Negroes” June 14, 1915

“Censors Bar Birth of a Nation” May 17, 1921

Ask each group to read and summarize the article, then report on it to the class. Ask groups to report in chronological order, so that the class develops an understanding of the progression of events after the movie was first shown.

7) End with a discussion of why these people objected so strongly to the airing of this film: How would acceptance of the stereotypes in the movie hinder the opportunities for advancement of all African Americans?

8) For homework, ask students to put themselves in the position of one of the people who might have protested the airing of the film. Assignment: write a letter, a diary entry, or a movie review describing some scenes from “Birth of a Nation” and explaining how the film depicts negative stereotypes. If a letter or a diary entry, students should say how the movie made them feel. If a movie review, the writer should speculate about the effects of the stereotypes depicted in the film.

Links to UEH Seminar:

The topic of the seminar was the origin and spread of stereotypical images of African Americans, with a particular focus on the influence of minstrel shows and of “Birth of a Nation”

Assessment:

Involvement in group work on primary documents will be assessed.

Student movie review/letter/diary will be assessed as homework.

Primary Documents Used:

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“Jim Crow Broadside”

Minstrel Documents, Boston Public Library;

“Denison’s Minstrels Sheet Music”

Duke University Library Digital Collection:

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***Boston Daily Globe* Articles:**

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“Birth of a Nation” 1915

